Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 11118 150715Z
ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 HA-05 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-08 INR-10
LAB-04 NSAE-00 SIL-01 DODE-00 PA-01 ICA-11 SP-02
NSC-05 SS-15 /075 W
----------038766 160332Z /70
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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
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E.O.11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT PGOV UK
SUBJECT: LABOR RETAINS TWO SEATS IN BY-ELECTION

REF: (A) LONDON 9250; (B) LONDON 10034

SUMMARY: LABOR RETAINED THE MANCHESTER MOSS SIDE AND PENISTONE SEATS IN THE JULY 12 BY-ELECTIONS (REF A), ALBEIT WITH REDUCED MARGINS IN PART REFLECTING LOW VOTER TURNOUTS. EVEN THOUGH THE TWO MAJOR PARTIES AND THE LIBERALS WERE ABLE TO FIND SOME CAUSE FOR GRATIFICATION IN THE BY-ELECTION RESULTS, WE DO NOT BELIEVE THEY WERE PARTICULARLY SIGNIFICANT IN TERMS OF THE TIMING AND OUTCOME OF A GENERAL ELECTION. OUR MONEY IS STILL ON THE OCTOBER TIME FRAME, WITH THE OUTCOME RATED AS A TOSS-UP. END SUMMARY.

1. THE LABOR PARTY RETAINED BOTH SEATS THAT WERE AT STAKE IN THE JULY 12 BY-ELECTIONS -- MANCHESTER MOSS SIDE AND PENISTONE -- THOUGH ITS MAJORITIES IN BOTH CONSTITUENCIES WERE SHARPLY REDUCED FROM THOSE OF OCTOBER 1974. AT MOSS SIDE, LABOR'S MAJORITY WAS CUT
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PAGE 02 LONDON 11118 150715Z

TO 1,500 FROM 4,000, ALLOWING ARCHITECT AND LOCAL COUNCILLOR GEORGE MORTON TO SLIP ONTO LABOR'S BENCHES IN COMMONS. THE VOTER TURNOUT AT MOSS SIDE, AS ANTICIPATED, WAS LOW -- 51.6 PERCENT -- BUT THE COLLAPSE OF THE LIBERAL VOTE -- WHICH FELL FROM NEARLY 6,000 IN OCTOBER TO 2,900 -- DID NOT CAUSE THE SEAT TO FALL TO THE CONSERVATIVES, AS SOME LABOR OFFICIALS FEARED MIGHT

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BE THE CASE (REF A). THE CONSERVATIVES, OF COURSE, WERE HEARTENED BY THEIR SHOWING AND THE 3.5 SWING AWAY FROM LABOR. GIVEN THE LOW TURNOUT, HOWEVER, WE DO NOT BELIEVE THE SWING HAS ANY SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR A FALL GENERAL ELECTION.

2. THE LABOR CANDIDATE AT PENISTONE, TRADE UNION OFFICIAL ALLEN MCKAY, WAS EASILY ELECTED, BUT SAW A 15,000 LABOR MAJORITY DROP TO 5,500 VOTES (A SWING OF 8.8 PERCENT), ALSO IN A LOW TURNOUT (59.8 PERCENT). THIS DECLINE, IF IT OCCURRED NATIONALLY, WOULD COST CALLAGHAN A GENERAL ELECTION, BUT WE DO NOT BELIEVE IT IS REPRESENTATIVE. THE IMPROVED TORY PERFORMANCE, HOWEVER, MUST HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGING FOR MRS. THATCHER. BUT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF THE PENISTONE POLL WAS THE WAY THE LIBERAL VOTE HELD UP. THE LIBERALS DROPPED ONLY TWO-TENTHS OF ONE PERCENT FROM THEIR STRONG 21.8 PERCENT SHOWING IN OCTOBER 1974, BY FAR THEIR BEST BY-ELECTION PERFORMANCE SINCE THAT TIME. THE REASONS FOR THIS STRONG, BUT UNCHARACTERISTIC, LIBERAL BY-ELECTION SHOWING ARE UNCLEAR, BUT THE RESULT TENDS TO REINFORCE OUR SKEPTICISM ABOUT THE UTILITY OF ATTEMPTING TO DRAW MEANINGFUL CONCLUSIONS FROM INDIVIDUAL BY-ELECTION RESULTS.

3. CALLAGHAN DECIDED TO CALL THESE TWO BY-ELECTIONS IN
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JULY TO TEST THE POPULAR WATER BEFORE POSSIBLY DIVING IN WITH A GENERAL ELECTION IN THE FALL. IN OUR JUDGMENT, HOWEVER, THE EVENTS OF RECENT WEEKS HAVE MADE A FALL GENERAL ELECTION INCREASINGLY LIKELY (REF B), SO THAT THE MOSS SIDE AND PENISTONE RESULTS WOULD HAVE BEEN ONLY MARGINALLY GERMANE TO THE GENERAL ELECTION QUESTION EVEN IF THEY HAD PRODUCED ANY CLEAR CONCLUSIONS. CALLAGHAN, HOWEVER, IS STILL EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY OF ARRANGEMENTS WITH THE MINOR PARTIES THAT WOULD ALLOW HIM TO COMMENCE A NEW SESSION OF PARLIAMENT IN NOVEMBER, EFFECTIVELY POSTPONING THE NATIONAL ELECTION, BUT IS PROBABLY DOING SO ONLY TO KEEP THAT OPTION OPEN IN CASE OF A SUDDEN CHANGE IN THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE. OUR MONEY IS STILL ON OCTOBER 12 AS THE LIKELY ELECTION DATE, AND AT THIS POINT CAN FIND NO SIGNIFICANT REASON TO FAVOR ONE PARTY OVER THE OTHER IN SUCH A RACE.

BREWSTER

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20 Mar 2014
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